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AUTHOR Shachter, Jaqueline
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ABSTRACT

In order to acquaint teachers with the range of children's literature about Latino culture, this paper describes works of writers from both the United States and Latin America. The materials described, written in English or Spanish, range from fiction and nonfiction to filmstrips and magazines. A list of 50 books, magazines, and nonprint materials is included. (CC)

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BRINGING TOGETHER LATINO CHILDREN AND THEIR LITERATURE

By Jaqueline Shachter

Substantial children's literature concerned with the Latino culture is written in English or Spanish in the United States and non-print supportive material is produced here, but teachers may not be acquainted with all that is available. In addition, fine children's books and new approaches to encourage reading have been developed in Latin America in the Spanish-speaking majority countries and in Portuguese-speaking Brazil, some of which would interest Latino pupils in this country. Each of these aspects will be considered.

U. S. Creators of Print and Non-Print Children's Literary Materials

Among some of the most recognized authors in the United States who often write about the Hispanic culture are Ricardo Alegría, Pura Belpré, Marie Hall Ets, Scott O'Dell, Mariana Prieto, Elizabeth Borton de Treviño, and Maia Wojciechowska. The focus will be on the main contribution of these and other selected creators of books for Latinos.

Ricardo Alegría, an anthropologist living in San Juan, Puerto Rico, has published nonfiction, History of the Indians of Puerto Rico, and a collection of Puerto Rican folk tales, The Three Wishes, illustrated by a fellow Puerto Rican, Lorenzo Homar, with the Spanish edition known as Cuentos folklóricos de Puerto Rico (Folk Tales of Puerto Rico).

Perhaps the best-known Puerto Rican recorder of folk tales for children is Pura Belpré, now a resident of New York City. She has written Oté: A Puerto Rican Folk Tale about a small boy, Chiquitín, overcoming the near-sighted devil

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and Santiago, realistic fiction about the developing friendship of a black and Puerto Rican boy. Her most famous book is Perez and Martina, which appears in separate English and Spanish editions. In this picture book, the cockroach señorita, Martina, is very particular about choosing the proper mate. She finally picks the handsome rat, Perez. Their marriage does not last long, however, because he is so anxious to eat the Christmas pudding boiling on the stove that, while trying to taste an almond, he falls into the pot and dies. Martina then begins a long period of mourning. The tragic ending seems more acceptable in the Latino than in Anglo cultures.

Another recorder of folk tales and realistic fiction in both Spanish and English is Mariana Prieto, originally from Cuba but presently living in Miami, Florida. Her folk tales include Ah Ucu and Itzo and El Gallo Sabio (The Wise Rooster).

Not from the Caribbean but from Mexico come the folk tales of Anita Brenner, now deceased. Her stories are The Boy Who Could Do Anything and A Hero by Mistake.

There have been many picture books with Latino appeal. Leo Politi's Pedro, Angel of Olvera Street and Juanita were both Caldecott honor books in the 1940's. Today they are sometimes criticized for showing stereotyped chicanos in serapes and sombreros, possibly leading a burro.

It was in 1960 that author-illustrator Marie Hall Ets won The Caldecott Medal for the picture book she did with Aurora Labastida, Nine Days to Christmas. The authors realized that the majority of Mexicans are city dwellers but picture books in the United States showed them as rural folk. To counteract this, they presented Ceci, a child in Mexico City, enjoying holiday pleasures. Equally

satisfying is Mrs. Ets' art and tender story in Gilberto and the Wind, based on a real child in a poor chicano family in California whose education she partially finances.

Picture books may deal with a traditional story in an unusual manner. Jack and Irene Delano of San Juan, Puerto Rico have given a distinct flavor to their Random House rendition of The Emperor's New Clothes by drawing a Caribbean setting. In their research, they found Hans Christian Andersen borrowed this story from folklore, so they felt at liberty to use it. The tale takes on a special mood when illustrations show balconies, cobblestone streets, and tropical fruit vendors.

Many books currently have photographic illustrations. Bill Binzen's black and white photographs provide the art for his simple stories, such as Miguel's Mountain and First Day in School. The latter appears in a Spanish edition, El primer día de clases, translated by Argentina Palacios. Ms. Palacios, a citizen of Panama who resides in New York City, has translated other Doubleday picture books into Spanish and has a promising future as an author in her own right.

Norma Holt's photographs provide the illustrations for Wendy Kesselman's picture book, Angelita. The photographs, which sometimes show Angelita on the beach in Puerto Rico in her underpants, are more natural than those in books depicting the passive Puerto Rican girl who keeps her clothes neat by not romping. The latter part of the story, however, is more stereotyped than the beginning. It repeats a frequent pattern in many books about Puerto Ricans who have just come to New York City. These book characters, at first lonely or frightened by a strange language and a cold climate, make a miraculous ghetto adjustment timed with the book's ending. That pattern is in Rose Blue's I Am Here. Yo Estoy Aquí, Lois Bouchard's The Boy Who Wouldn't Talk, Peter Burchard's Chito, Mina Lewiton's Candida's Choice, Virginia Ormsby's What's Wrong with Julio?, and Yetta Speevack's The Spider Plant.

Though Louisa Shotwell focuses in Magdalena on the same problem of the Puerto Rican child's need to "belong" in a changing metropolitan world, the material is not stereotyped when old values clash with new. This story of an eleven-year-old girl being raised by her grandmother benefits from the black and white illustrations of Lilian Obligado.

Going from fiction to nonfiction for the moment, readers might find two collective biographies especially effective. One, The Quiet Rebels by Philip Sterling and María Brau, introduces four historical political leaders in Puerto Rico. The other, The Mexican Story by May McNeer and Lynd Ward, presents numerous heroes with colorful pictures by Mr. Ward.

Among informational nonfiction are Sonia Bleeker's The Aztec, Indians of Mexico, The Inca, Indians of the Andes, and The Maya, Indians of Central America. The Native American influence on Latin American culture cannot be forgotten. It was Ann Nolan Clark, who, armed with facts about one nation, the Inca, spun a fictional account, Secret of the Andes, which won The Newbery Medal in 1953. The story revolves around the lad Cusi, raised by old Chuto, who has been chosen to know the location of the Incas' llama herd and secret gold. Standing as I did this summer at Machupijchu, high in the Andes Mountains next to boys of Cusi's age watching their llamas, I felt like I was reliving the Clark book.

The year after Secret of the Andes won The Newbery Medal, Joseph Krumgold's . . . and Now Miguel received that same honor. It tells of youthful Miguel Chavez from a sheep-herding family in New Mexico who wants to go with the men to the mountains during the summer to pasture the sheep. Mr. Krumgold told me in a videotaped interview that the book was written to explore the adolescent boy's relationship to his family as an economic unit and to the society which is about to accept him as a man. Among the Chavezes, the family was a strong economic unit.

After Scott O'Dell won The Newbery Medal in 1961 for Island of the Blue Dolphins, he created three Newbery honor books which show aspects of Hispanic as well as Native American culture. They are The King's Fifth, set in the Southwest and Mexico, The Black Pearl, set in Baja California, and Sing Down the Moon, set in the Southwest. His Carlota deals with a Mexican girl raised to be as independent as a boy.

In 1965, Maia Wojciechowska won The Newbery Medal for Shadow of a Bull which shows the courage of a deceased bullfighter's son in Spain who chooses not to follow in his father's footsteps.

The last winner of The Newbery Medal that deals with the Hispanic world is I, Juan de Pareja by Elizabeth Borton de Treviño, a United States citizen who lives in Mexico. Here is the biography of a Moorish slave, Juan de Pareja, who served the artist Velásquez in Spain. Pareja became a secret painter until he was granted his freedom and could openly apply brush to canvas.

I saw what inspired Mrs. Treviño to write the book, a portrait print of Pareja, when I visited her home. In 1974, as leader of a studytour on children's literature to Mexico, Puerto Rico, Colombia, and Venezuela, I had the pleasure of luxuriating with my students around Mrs. Treviño's swimming pool in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Several days later, I was a similar guest in the Mexico City home of folklore collector Anita Brenner. Unfortunately, not long afterwards she was killed in an automobile accident. On that same tour, in Puerto Rico, Ricardo Alegría, flanked by his assistants, spoke to my group at the Puerto Rican Cultural Institute and, at a San Juan bookstore salon, a meeting took place with Jack and Irene Delano.

I renewed my acquaintance with Mrs. Treviño by arranging to interview her on the "Profiles in Literature" series of videotapes produced at Temple University in Philadelphia with outstanding children's authors, illustrators, and editors.

In her case, separate half-hour programs were produced in English and in Spanish. These programs are available to the public, like the "Profiles" interviews with others mentioned previously: Pura Belpré, Joseph Krumgold, Scott O'Dell, and Lynd Ward and May McNeer.

Scott O'Dell can also be seen on a "Meet the Newbery Author" filmstrip from Miller-Brody Productions in New York. From Miller-Brody and Weston Woods in Weston, Connecticut, filmstrips of picture books are available with audio cassettes in Spanish or English.

The filmstrips, like most of the Spanish/English children's trade books, are of popular stories, generally not associated with the Latino culture. An early exception was Munro Leaf's The Story of Ferdinand about a bull who did not want to fight any torero, printed in English in 1936 and in Spanish in 1962, twenty-six years later. It is significant that not until the 1960's did most publishers respond to the need for Spanish editions. A rare book was the 1949 Cowboy Small (Vaquero Pequeño) with Spanish on the top and English on the bottom of the same page. The arrangement of the two languages in juxtaposition, whether on facing pages or on top and bottom of the same page, seems to be favored by those who are English dominant while some who are Spanish dominant prefer separate editions or one language at the beginning and the other at the end of the same book.

Translator Argentina Palacios, for example, prefers the separation of Spanish and English texts. This capable writer was my roommate on a 1977 summer studytour on children's literature to Argentina, Brazil, and Peru.

Literary Inspiration from Latin America

On the 1977 studytour and the previous one in 1974, friendships developed with outstanding Latin American children's authors, some of whose books should be made known in this country. In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, for instance, artist Jorge Machado has drawn a wordless picture book, Ida e Volta (Going and Coming), that has international appeal. The book traces a pair of footprints, joined by

puppy prints, through various events but the main character's face is never seen.

In Buenos Aires, Argentina, Beatriz Ferro has created colorful books with excellent design. Fluent in English, she can translate them herself if she finds a willing publisher. One of her picture books, En el país del puede ser (In the Land of Maybe), offers imaginative substitutes in text and art for such concrete objects as an umbrella, suggesting a bus, an awning, even a large hat or newspaper.

In São Paulo, Brazil, the woman who arranged studytour activities was the famous children's author, Odette de Barros Mott, whose book, Justino o Retirante (Justin the Migrant), won honorable mention for the international Hans Christian Andersen Prize. Her Portuguese realistic fiction describes the poverty of a recently-orphaned farm lad from northern Brazil who joins other migrants in search of food and water. He is fortunate enough to meet a kind keeper of a boarding house who lets him work for her and she, in turn, makes it possible for him to be educated.

If translated into English, Justin the Migrant might be as well received in the United States as the translation of S. R. Van Iterson's Colombian book, Pulga, which won the Mildred L. Batchelder Award in 1973. This award is given to the most outstanding book originally published in a foreign language in another country. Translated by Alexander and Alison Gode, Pulga, which means "flea," is about a thirteen-year-old slum dweller who has hope for the future when he is hired as a trucker's helper.

Some of the children's magazines, Billiken from Argentina, Siete from Mexico, and Tricolor from Venezuela, would be appreciated in the United States if placed in public libraries frequented by Spanish-speaking young people. All three popular periodicals contain stories, games, and nonfictional accounts. Billiken is a name. Siete, meaning "seven," draws its title from the fact that it is modern, designed for the "seventies," and Tricolor refers to the three colors of the Venezuelan

flag. Both Siete and Tricolor are government-supported magazines which are free for pupils who cannot afford them. There is no similar federal funding of children's magazines in this country.

Further encouragement of reading in Latin America comes from presentations in puppet theaters of children's literature. Puppeteers or their shows were seen in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela. In Caracas, Venezuela, it was exciting to visit Tilingo Theater, especially designed for children's puppet shows, with a storage room of elaborate puppet costumes. Adjacent is the Mariano Picón Salas Children's Library, an inviting place where birds fly behind a planted enclosed area.

The best network of children's libraries in Latin America, however, is in São Paulo, Brazil where there are twenty-three libraries constructed for children alone. These contain art and game rooms as well as music rooms where young people can dance, all designed to bring students off the street and then entice them to read. A São Paulo organization, CELIJÚ (Center for the Study of Children's and Adolescent Literature) engages in Sunday storytelling in various neighborhoods to encourage reluctant readers to take an interest in literature. These are a few ideas that can be borrowed from our southern neighbors in an effort to popularize the reading of literature in this country.

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